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ABSTRACT

Teaching through counterparts--using modern treatments of standard literary themes and texts--is a technique designed to share with students perspectives on both traditional and contemporary literature. This paper describes the development of an English literature survey course in which traditional literary works were studied along with contemporary treatments of the themes in those works. The paper cites the paired works that were used and discusses problems and possibilities of this approach. (GW)

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Teaching Through Counterparts: Modern Responses To Traditional Literature

Libby Bay

Were English teachers asked to vote on the most loathesome word of the past decade, there is little doubt that "relevance" in all its various forms would draw the prize. It is hardly a word that Emily Dickinson would "take her hat off to," yet deference it has received. Many a curriculum has changed to become relevant; authors like Spenser, have been removed from syllabi because of irrelevance; and teachers who do not emphasize contemporary culture are ignored as irrelevancies.

Yet to confront contemporary culture in a vacuum is like starting a book at the end. Sometimes, it is true, in heightened curiosity, we do flip to the back pages of a novel, but if these last phrases do not disappoint us, we quickly return to the opening chapters. On the other hand, to ignore modern civilization and its products is never to move near the back of the book at all, and this course is equally hazardous.

To perceive ourselves and the world in which we live in the fullest perspective, then, it is necessary to look back to the beginning and forward to the continuations, to turn our heads, like the Roman God Janus, in two directions at the same time. As teachers committed to the fullness of the western literary tradition, but equally devoted to the connections between literature and life, we devote much professional energy to finding ways to gain a handle on the past by turning the knob of the present. It is true that literature is inherently connected to life and survives because it does speak to men and women across time and place. The classics are, as was said of Chaucer, not for an age but for all time, yet many students and some teachers do not always catch these connections, or perceive them "after the fact." Some archly conservative teachers approach older literature solely through literal interpretations of the texts and thus set antiquity in cold storage

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for the students.

On the other hand, teachers who take the accomplishments of ancient peoples and, in the name of relevance, freeze them to suit modern needs also achieve numbing effects. How ideal if, like Janus, we could perceive and share with our students both perspectives simultaneously.

Teaching through counterparts, using modern treatments of standard literary themes and texts, is a technique designed to achieve this goal.

My first venture with counterparts came when I was having difficulty devising term paper topics, in the first half of my English Literature survey course, to which students would respond enthusiastically--and, incidentally, which could not be easily plagiarized. In talking with the students about the kinds of things they were reading outside of class, it occurred to me that I might be able to build on their interests. I included in their term paper suggestion sheet the following ideas: Take one of the following pairs, develop a basis of comparison and examine it thoroughly in a full, cohesive and lucid essay:

Beowulf.....Tolkien Lord Of the Rings

Sir Gawain.....White The Once and Future King

"Second Shepherd's Play and other Mysteries"..Odets The Flowering Peach

Everyman.....Ionesco Exit the King

Romeo and Juliet.....Rostand The Romancers

Dr. Faustus.....Mann's Dr. Faustus

Many students opted for these choices and achieved interesting and scholarly results.

Andre Gide, in a letter to Francois Mauriac, said of the bible and Greek mythology, what I began to feel about earlier cultures in general: "I consider the scriptures and mythology inexhaustibly, infinitely resourceful and destined to become enriched with each interpretation suggested by a new intellectual orientation."

Thus the next year it occurred to me that it might be enriching to incorporate such study into the actual course curriculum as a way of having students grasp the vitality of these older works and realize the immediacy of the past.

Last year, then, my required reading list for English Literature included the following:

Beowulf and John Gardner's Grendel

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight selections from Morte D'Arthur and and Lerner and Lowe's "Camelot"

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and a study of recent court decisions on pornography

Medieval tropes, mysteries and moralities and E. E. Cummings "Santa Claus: A Morality"

Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse Winner"

Shakespeare's Macbeth and Garson's Macbird

Milton's Paradise Lost and Karl Shapiro's "Adam and Eve"

There are problems involved in such an approach. Time is the biggest one: trying to get to the modern responses without neglecting a serious study of the older works is no easy feat. I have tried to solve this problem by seeking out shorter contemporary works to use, stories and poetry primarily.

A second difficulty: this course was British Literature, but sometimes the best contemporary examples were American. I didn't try to resolve this difficulty; I just used what appealed to me and what I thought students would enjoy. Third problem: some of the modern works were not deserving of the time spent at the expense of the better older works. I am still working on this dilemma: I won't do Macbird again, for example, or Camelot.

Sometimes, incidentally, chance is a teacher's best ally. For example, I feel indebted to Richard Nixon for very little, but he did provide me with a marvelous counterpart to The Canterbury Tales in Judith Wax's treatment of "The Waterbury Tales." Recently, a "Guest Word" piece in the NY Times wrote about Steinbeck's intention to "bring to present day usage the stories of King Arthur" and Tortilla Flat, which I had quite forgotten, may soon make its appearance on my syllabus.

An exciting essay by Hazel Barnes in the Phi Beta Kappa Key Reporter, summer 1976, entitled "Greek Mythical Figures as Contemporary Images," alerted me to the applicability of counterparts in a World Literature class. No works have been treated more often than the bible and Greek mythology. Anouilh's, Sartre's, Camus', handling of Greek themes, Macleish's J.B., Neil Simon's God[illegible]vorite, even Superstar immediately come to mind.

Finally, the possibility of counterparts as a course in itself rather than as an auxiliary to world or British literature is challenging. Such an approach could cross cultural lines--The Japanese novel, The Woman in the Dunes, for example, is Sisyphus in oriental dress--as well as discipline lines--the musical treatments of the Faust motif are manifold as are contemporary artistic depictions of Don Quixote.

In very old words, there may be "nothing new under the sun" but there are different slants of light daily.